

# Hills could soon become stargazers' mecca



Van Gogh couldn't paint it any better: Every night is a starry one at Le Terrain, an off-grid wilderness sanctuary near Ladysmith. Photo: courtesy Le Terrain

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What does the municipality of La Pêche and Hollywood have in common? Star-studded hills, of course.

The only difference: instead of a Walk of Fame, La Pêche's stars are spread out over the night sky.

Viewing those stars could soon be even easier in the Hills if the municipality is successful in its bid to establish a certified Dark Sky Preserve in La Pêche. This would make it only the third region in Quebec to have such a distinction.

Wakefield Coun. Claude Giroux has been working alongside Le Terrain owner Steve Durand to protect the municipality's skies from light pollution. Recently, La Pêche council passed a resolution that would allow the municipality to apply to the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada for Dark Sky Preserve certification.

“You know, it's hard to argue against having a Dark Sky Preserve especially in a really natural, eco-touristic, wilderness-based, beautiful municipality like La Pêche,” Durand recently told the Low Down. “But still, you never know what's going to happen, so after all the work [we put in] to get this resolution passed unanimously is fantastic. I'm super happy about it.”

A Dark Sky Preserve is an area where artificial light is restricted in order to keep light pollution at a minimum. The area is usually concentrated around a designated centre, referred to as a Dark Skies Park. In the case of La Pêche, the “bull's eye of darkness,” as Durand described it, would be Le Terrain, Durand's 430-acre wilderness park in the northwestern corner of the municipality.

Following discussion with the Royal Astronomical Society, another Dark Skies Park could also be developed surrounding an observation area in nearby Lac-des-Loups, Durand explained.

Bringing Dark Skies to La Pêche hasn't been an overnight process: Giroux and Durand, along with Durand's brother, Julian, established the Earth and Sky Foundation four years ago to lobby for a Dark Sky Park at Le Terrain.

The process of obtaining certification for a Dark Sky Preserve is “deeply bureaucratic,” according to Durand, but should only take an estimated three or four months to complete.

Once certified, rules for restricting light would apply to the entire municipality – meaning dimmer outdoor lighting, which the municipality is already working toward by installing LED bulbs with a rating of 2,000 Kelvin in all streetlights.

“Criteria for restricting light is stricter the closer you get to the observation area,” Giroux explained.

The effect on local businesses will be minimal, Grioux said, adding that there would be a two or three-year grace period to comply with any

regulations for outdoor lighting (this includes the MRC des Collines police station, which, as neighbours can attest, is almost aggressively illuminated at night).

Luckily, light pollution is easier to fight than most pollution: simply turn off or turn down the lights, and you'll be immediately rewarded by the results.

Off-grid wilderness sanctuary Le Terrain owner Steve Durand moved to his property near Ladysmith from New York City in 2015, but said that he didn't decide to move to the region per se, rather, as he puts it, he was "called."

He described being "gobsmacked" by the view of the stars from the property and told himself, "I gotta do something to share this."

Durand, who lives entirely off-grid, turned his property into a wilderness sanctuary with trails and cabins for hikers and nature-lovers to enjoy. He has also built a stargazing cabin on his property and plans to build more dedicated infrastructure for professional and amateur astronomers to be able to take in the unadulterated night sky.

For Wakefield Coun. Claude Giroux, an astronomy buff and avid stargazer, protecting the night sky from light pollution is paramount, but there are also economic reasons for creating a Dark Sky Preserve in La Pêche: he said he believes there is huge potential for an increase in ecotourism for the municipality, if it is able to secure certification.

It's also a question of public health, he said, explaining, "one of the reasons I'm interested in doing this is because a lot of people don't realize that light pollution is in fact pollution," which he said can have a negative impact on quality of life.

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